

NOTES ON DILETTANTISM

(1799)

DILETTANTISM presupposes Art, as botch-work does handicraft.—Idea of Artist, in opposition to Dilettante.—Practice of Art scientifically.—Adoption of an Objective Art.—Legitimate progress and advancement.—Calling and profession.—Connection with a world of Art and Artists.—Schools.

The Dilettante does not hold the same relation to all the arts.

All the arts have an objective and a subjective side, and according as one or the other of these is predominant, the Dilettante has value or not.

Where the subjective of itself is of great importance, the Dilettante must and can approximate to the artist. For instance, oratory, lyrical poetry, music, dance.

Where the reverse is the case, there is a more marked distinction between Artist and Dilettante, as in architecture, the arts of design, epic and dramatic poetry.

Art itself gives laws, and commands the time.

Dilettantism follows the lead of the time.

When masters in art follow a false taste, the Dilettante expects so much the sooner to reach the level of art.

The Dilettante, receiving his first impulse to self-production from the effect of works of art on him, confounds these effects with the objective causes and mo-

Goethe's *Literary Essays*

tives, and would now make the state of feeling he has been put into productive and practical; as if out of the fragrance of flowers one should try to reproduce flowers themselves.

The *speaking to the feelings*, the last effect of all poetical organization, but which presupposes the concurrences of the whole of art, seems to the Dilettante to be the thing itself, and out of it he endeavors to produce.

In general, the Dilettante, in his ignorance of himself, puts the passive in the place of the active, and because he receives a lively impression from effects, thinks from these impressed effects to produce other effects.

The peculiar want of the Dilettante is *Architectonic*, in the highest sense,—that practical power which creates, forms, constitutes. Of this he has only a sort of misgiving, and submits himself to his material, instead of commanding it.

It will be found that the Dilettante runs particularly to neatness, which is the completion of the thing in hand, wherefrom a sort of illusion arises, as if the thing itself were worthy of existing. The same holds true of accuracy (*accuratesse*), and all the last conditions of Form, which can just as well accompany the formless.

General principles on which Dilettantism is allowable:—

When the Dilettante subjects himself to the severest rules at the outset, and undertakes to complete all the successive steps with the greatest strictness,—which he can the better afford to do, inasmuch as (1) the goal is not demanded of him; and, (2) if he wishes to

Notes on Dilettantism

retreat, he has prepared the surest path to connoisseurship.

In opposition to the general maxim, the Dilettante will thus be subject to more severe criticism than the Artist, who, resting upon a secure basis of art, incurs less danger in departing from rules, and may even by that means enlarge the province of art itself. The true artist rests firmly and securely upon himself. His endeavor, his mark, is the highest aim of art. In his own estimation he will always be far from that aim, and necessarily, therefore, will be always modest in regard to art or the idea of art, and will maintain that he has as yet accomplished little, no matter how excellent his work may be, or how high his consciousness of superiority, in reference to the world, may reach. Dilettanti, or real botchers, seem, on the other hand, not to strive towards an aim, not to see what is beyond, but only what is beside them. On this account they are always comparing, are for the most part extravagant in their praise, unskilful where they blame, have an infinite deference for their like, thus giving themselves an air of friendliness and fairness, which is in fact only to exalt themselves.

Dilettantism in Lyrical Poetry

The fact that the German language was in the beginning applied to poetry, not by any one great poetic genius, but through merely middling heads, must inspire Dilettantism with confidence to essay itself in it.

The cultivation of French literature and language has made even Dilettanti more artistic.

The French were always more rigorous, tended to

Goethe's Literary Essays

severer correctness, and demanded even of Dilettanti taste and spirit within, and externally a faultless diction.—In England, Dilettantism held more by Latin and Greek.—Sonnets of the Italians.

Impudence of the latest Dilettantism, originated and maintained through reminiscences of a richly cultivated poetic dialect, and the facility of a good mechanical exterior.

Polite literature of universities, induced by a modern method of study.—Lady poems.—Schöngesteirei (bel esprit).—Annual *Keepsakes*.—Musenalmanache.—Journals.—Beginning and spread of translations.

Immediate transition from the classes and the university to authorship.—Epoch of ballads, and songs of the people.—Gessner, poetic prose.—Imitation of the bards.—Bürger's influence on sing-song.—Rhymeless verses. — Klopstockean odes. — Claudius. — Wieland's laxity.—In earlier times: Latin verses; pedantism; more handicraft; skill, without poetic spirit.

Dilettantism in Pragmatic Poetry

Reasons why the Dilettante hates the powerful, the passionate, the characteristic, and only represents the middling, the moral.

The Dilettante never paints the object, but only the feeling it gives rise to in him.

He avoids the character of the object.

All Dilettante creations in this style of poetry will have a pathological character, and express only the attractions and repulsions felt by their author.

The Dilettante thinks to reach poetry by means of his wits.

Notes on Dilettantism

Dramatic botchers go mad when they desire to give effect to their work.

Dilettantism in Dramatic Art

French comedy is, even among amateurs, *obligato*, and a social institution.

Italian amateur-comedy is founded on a puppet, or puppet-like, representation.

Germany, in former times, Jesuit-schools.

In later times: French amateur-comedies, for aiding the cultivation of the language, in noble houses.

Mixing up of ranks in German amateur-comedy.

Conditions, under which, perhaps, a moderate practice in theatrical matters may be harmless and allowable, or even in some measure advantageous:

Permanence of the same company.

To avoid passionate pieces, and choose such as are reflective and social.

To admit no children or very young persons.

Greatest possible strictness in outward forms.

Advantages of Dilettantism in General

It prevents an entire want of cultivation.

Dilettantism is a necessary consequence of a general extension of art, and may even be a cause of it.

It can, under certain circumstances, help to excite and develop a true artistic talent.

Elevates handicraft to a certain resemblance to art.

Has a civilizing tendency.

In case of crude ignorance, it stimulates a certain taste for art, and extends it to where the artist would not be able to reach.

Goethe's Literary Essays

Gives occupation to productive power, and cultivates something serious in man.

Appearances are changed into ideas.

Teaches to analyze impressions.

Aids the appropriation and reproduction of forms.

In Lyrical Poetry

Cultivation of language in general.

More manifold interest "in humanioribus," in contrast to the crudeness of the ignorant, or the pedantic narrowness of the mere man of business or pedant.

Cultivation of the feelings and of the verbal expression of the same.

The cultivated man ought to be able to express his feelings with poetic beauty.

Idealization of concepts regarding objects of common life. Cultivation of the imagination, especially as an integral part of the culture of the intellect.

Awaking and direction of the productive imagination to the highest functions of the mind in the sciences and practical life.

Cultivation of the sense of the rhythmical.

There being no objective laws, either for the internal or external construction of a poem, the amateur ought to hold fast to acknowledged models much more strongly than the master does, and rather imitate the good that exists than strive after originality; and in the external and metrical parts, follow strictly the well-known general rules.

And as the Dilettante can only form himself after models, he ought, in order to avoid one-sidedness, to acquire the most universal knowledge of all models, and

Notes on Dilettantism

survey the field of poetic literature even more perfectly than is required of the artist himself.

In the Dramatic Art

Opportunity of farther cultivation in declamation.

Attention to one's own representations.

Participates in the advantages predicated of Dancing.

Exercise of the Memory.

Sensuous attention and accuracy.

Disadvantage of Dilettantism in General

The Dilettante jumps over the steps, stops at certain steps which he regards as the end, and from which he thinks himself justified in judging of the whole; this prevents his perfectibility.

He subjects himself to the necessity of working by false rules, because he cannot work even as a Dilettante without some rules, and he does not understand the true objective rules.

He departs more and more from the truth of objects, and loses himself in subjective errors.

Dilettantism deprives art of its element, and spoils art's public by depriving it of its earnestness and strictness.

All tendency to easy contentment destroys art, and Dilettantism brings in indulgence and favor. At the expense of the true artists, it brings into notice those that stand nearest to Dilettantism.

With Dilettantism the loss is always greater than the gain.

From handicraft the way is open to rise to art, but not from botch-work.

Goethe's Literary Essays

Dilettantism favors the indifferent, partial, and characterless.

Injury Dilettanti do to art by bringing artists down to their level.

Can bear no good artist near them.

In all cases where the art itself has no proper regulative power, as in Poetry, the art of Gardening, acting, the injury Dilettantism does is greater, and its pretensions more arrogant. The worst case is that of histrionic art.

In Lyrical Poetry

Belletristic shallowness and emptiness, withdrawal from solid studies, or superficial treatment.

A greater danger exists in this than in the other arts of mistaking a merely Dilettante dexterity for a true genius for art; and in this case, the subject is worse off than in any other Dilettantism, because its existence becomes an entire nullity; for the poet is nothing at all except through earnestness and conformity to art.

Dilettantism in general, but especially in poetry, weakens the feeling and perception for the good that lies beyond it, and whilst it is indulgent to a restless desire to produce, which leads it to nothing perfect, robs itself of all the culture it might derive through the perception of foreign excellences.

Poetical Dilettantism may be of two sorts. Either it neglects the (indispensable) mechanical, and thinks enough done if it shows mind and feeling; or it seeks poetry only in the mechanical, acquiring a technical dexterity therein, but without spirit or significance. Both

Notes on Dilettantism

are injurious, but the former rather injures the art, and the latter the subject.

All Dilettanti are Plagiarists. They enervate and pull to pieces all that is original in manner or matter, and at the same time imitate, copy, and piece out their own emptiness with it. Thus the language gets filled with phrases and formulae stolen from all sides, which have no longer any meaning, and you may read whole books written in a fine *style* and containing nothing. In a word, all that is really beautiful and good in true poetry is profaned, rendered common, and degraded.

In Pragmatical Poetry

All the disadvantages of Dilettantism in Lyrical Poetry apply here in a far higher degree. Not the art alone, but the subject also, suffers more.

Mixing up of different kinds.

In Histrionic Art

Caricature of one's own faulty individuality.

Incapacitates the mind for all occupation, through the illusion of a fantastic mode of viewing objects.

Expense of interest and passion, without fruit.

Eternal circle of monotonous, ever repeated, ineffectual activity.

(There is nothing so attractive to Dilettanti as rehearsals. Professional actors hate them.)

Special forbearance and pampering of theatrical Dilettanti with applause.

Eternal stimulation towards a passionate condition and behavior, without balance.

Goethe's Literary Essays

Feeding all hateful passions, with the worst results for civic and domestic existence.

Blunting the feeling for poetry.

Use of exalted language for commonplace sentiments.

A rag-fair of thoughts, commonplaces, and descriptions in the memory.

Pervading affectation and mannerism, reaching also into life.

Most injurious indulgence towards the indifferent and faulty, in a public and quite personal case.

The general tolerance for the home-made becomes in this case more pronounced.

Most pernicious use of amateur comedies for the education of children, where it turns into caricature. In the same manner, the most dangerous of all amusements for universities, &c.

Destruction of the ideality of art, because the Dilettante, not being able to raise himself through the appropriation of artistic ideas and traditions, must do all through a pathological reality.